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ABSTRACT

This Digest considers language learning as a socio-cultural process, contending that to fully function in a particular language, one not only needs to understand the mechanics, such as the grammar, but also to apply that language across various contexts, audiences, and purposes. The Digest discusses language learning at home, language learning in communities, and language learning among linguistic minority children. It emphasizes that it is through meaningful interaction with others as well as functional use in daily life that children develop competence, fluency, and creativity in language. The Digest points out that with the increasing number of linguistic minority children in the United States, school systems need to take into consideration the linguistic knowledge these minority children possess in their mother tongues to design a conducive learning environment. (NKA)

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Language Learning in Social and Cultural Contexts

by Mei-Yu Lu

In her book Ways with Words, Heath (1983) writes ". . . the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which [members of] each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization" (p. 11). According to Heath, children learn language, be it spoken or written, through the process of socializing in the specific society they are in. Heath (1983) observed ways that three groups of children acquired and used language, and she discovered that children exhibited language behaviors in accordance with the values of their respective families and communities.

Language Learning at Home

Language learning takes place at least partly as a means of social participation (Goodman & Goodman, 1990), which usually begins at home. From birth, children are engaged in various interactions with family members. Infants learn the social function of language long before they are able to utter any intelligible words. During daily routines, parents and caregivers often talk with children in a special type of utterance called motherese. Motherese contains short, repetitive phrases with exaggerated intonation and clear pronunciation (Snow & Ferguson, 1977), such as "dada" for "daddy" and "bibi" for "baby." Weaver (1994) suggested that such parent-child interaction facilitates the process of communication, the social function of language. In the process of acquiring oral language, young children are active agents. They not only receive language input from others, but they also generate hypotheses about rules of language use through social engagement with other more competent language users (Newman, 1985). Lindfors (1987) believes that even very young children are able to hypothesize, trying out language as they encounter it in particular contexts. Through feedback from parents and caregivers as well as further exposure and interaction, children eventually modify or confirm their hypotheses.

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Language Learning in Communities

In addition to their experiences at home, children also interact with community members. Such interaction contributes to children's overall language learning. Heath (1983) found that for children to get along with people and to accomplish social goals, they need to learn their community's ways of language use, and they also acquire those ways of using language through experiences in various community activities and interactions. Heath suggests that each community has specific ways of socializing members and helping them function in the community. In addition, there are several features in children's social and linguistic environments which vary strikingly from one community to the other. These features include:

> . . . the boundaries of the physical and social communities in which communication to and by children is possible; the limits and features of the situations in which talk occurs; the what, how and why patterns of choice which children can exercise in their uses of language; and the values these choices of language have for the children in their communities and beyond. (p.144)

For example, Heath found that children from Trackton and Roadville exhibited very different storytelling behaviors. The Trackton children were encouraged to exaggerate and to fantasize when telling a story, whereas children from Roadville, who were expected to recount factual information, interpreted that behavior as lying. These differences had an impact on how the children performed in school, at which another set of expectations prevailed.

Language Learning among Linguistic Minority Children

In the past two decades, the number of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the United States has increased. Many of these children enter schools with little or no English. However, they bring into classrooms the knowledge of their mother tongues and their cultural and linguistic values. Schools need to encourage linguistic minority children to maintain the use of their mother tongue while learning a new language. Heath (1986) also proposes that in order for all children to achieve success in school, the ways children use language to learn must be given as much consideration as the specific language they speak.

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Information about their previously acquired "ways with words" can be used to facilitate their learning in school.

Researchers (Heath, 1986; Wong-Fillmore, 1983, 1989) have studied how linguistic and cultural minority children in America use language in the classroom. Their findings suggest that linguistic minority children have different ways of using language than their mainstream American peers and teachers. Both Wong-Fillmore (1983, 1989) and Heath (1986) studied children from Chinese-speaking and Spanish-speaking, mostly Mexican, families. Their research has shown that Chinese-speaking children tend to be adult-oriented. They appear to interact frequently with adults and to be concerned about meeting the teacher's expectations. By contrast, Hispanic children are more peer-oriented in seeking assistance. Wong-Fillmore (1983) suggests that the class context strongly influences these children's learning in American schools. When in a classroom where students are mostly second language learners, the teacher becomes the main resource of English. In order to interact with each other, the students need to use English as the primary means for oral communication. It follows that they supply each other with less conventional versions of English. Under these circumstances, adult-oriented second language children tend to receive richer English input from their teacher and learn more than their peer-oriented counterparts. In a classroom where native English speakers outnumber linguistic minority children, peer-oriented second language learners will have more opportunities to interact with native speakers, thus receiving more English input than their adult-oriented counterparts. It is, therefore, important that educators be aware of the cultural and linguistic differences among children of different groups in order to design a conducive learning environment for all learners.

In sum, language learning is a socio-cultural process. To fully function in a particular language, one not only needs to understand the mechanics, such as the grammar, but also to apply that language across various contexts, audiences, and purposes. It is through meaningful interaction with others as well as functional use in daily life that children develop competence, fluency, and creativity in language. With the increasing number of linguistic minority children in the United States, the school system needs to take into consideration the linguistic knowledge these children possess in their mother tongues in order to design a conducive learning environment. The linguistic resources these children bring into classrooms not only provide a foundation upon which to learn English but they also offer schools and society multicultural perspectives on learning.

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